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Reagan Administration Denies U.S. Link to Plane

By Joanne Omang
Washington Post Staff Writer

Top Reagan administration officials yesterday flatly denied any U.S. government connection with a transport plane that the Sandinista government said it shot down in Nicaragua with three Americans and a man of Latin origin aboard.

At the same time, U.S. officials indicated that they knew more about the situation than they were willing to disclose, including the names of those killed in the crash. Secretary of State George P. Shultz said the aircraft was "hired by private people" who "had no connection with the U.S. government at all." He said they were "not from our military, not from any U.S. government agency, CIA included These are private citizens."

A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency denied the agency was involved in the mission, as the Nicaraguan government asserted, but refused to deny that it knew anything about it.

The issue of CIA involvement was heightened by Wisconsin relatives of Eugene Hasenfus, the lone survivor of the crash. Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, told reporters that Hasenfus' wife, Sally, had telephoned the State Department yesterday morning from her home in Marinette, Wis., "and said her husband worked for the CIA."

A spokesman for Sally Hasenfus said she "is not granting any interviews to anyone." Earlier Hasenfus was quoted by wire services as saying of her husband, "I don't know where he is and what he's doing. I only know what I see on the TV, too, and I really don't know anymore."

The Associated Press said that Hasenfus' brother, William, reportedly told a friend that Hasenfus had gone to work 20 years ago for Air America in Vietnam, when it was a CIA cover company, and later returned to work for the firm readying cargo for air drops.

Kathy Pherson, a CIA spokesman, denied any link. "We have nothing to do with the plane, nothing to do with the guy. He does not work for us, and we are not involved," she said. The CIA is barred by law from aiding the Nicaraguan contras, or counterrev-

olutionaries, with anything but intelligence information, "and we do not break those restrictions," she said.

Asked whether that meant the agency knew nothing about the incident, Pherson said, "I can't help you."

Asked to identify the four men, State Department officials said they had the names but would not reveal them. They would not say how they had obtained the names.

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told reporters that if reports that the four were carrying arms to anti-Nicaraguan rebels were true, "then they are heroes."

Ernesto Palazzo, spokesman here for the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the rebels' umbrella organization, said the downed plane "could very well be" one of the contras' planes, but that he was not yet certain. "Ever since Congress placed restrictions on aid, we have had to go get private donations," he said. "Occasionally we have had to use the services of volunteers to complement our own pilots."

He said there had been no contact yet with contras on the ground near the crash site in southern Nicaragua.

Spokesmen for several groups previously associated with aid shipments to the contras denied any link to or knowledge of this flight. They included officials of the Civilian Materiel Assistance, formerly Civilian-Military Assistance, in Memphis, which supplies medical and other aid and which lost two members in a September 1984 helicopter crash in Nicaragua.

Retired major general John K. Singlaub, head of the U.S. Council for World Freedom in Phoenix, who has spoken proudly of facilitating arms purchases for the contras, said from the Far East through spokeswoman Joyce Downey that he knew nothing about the plane. "We have located all of our people," Downey said.

Officials of Southern Air Transport in Miami, whose planes have reportedly been chartered for previous aid flights to Nicaragua, said they knew nothing about this one or Hasenfus. William Hasenfus said his brother, Eugene, had been working for a Florida air freight company, but refused to name it.

Defense Department records show that a Eugene Hasenfus joined the U.S. Marines on May 9, 1960, was trained as a parachute rigger for equipment drops and sent to Camp Pendleton, Calif., where he remained until he left the service as a corporal June 17, 1965.

His military records say he did not serve abroad. His stepmother, Theresa Hasenfus, told The Associated Press, however, that he had served in Vietnam.

Durenberger said at a news conference that the CIA had assured the intelligence committee that "there is absolutely no connection between that plane, what was in that airplane, the pilots or anybody else [on board] and a U.S. government-financed or -sponsored effort such as the so-called contra operation."

Durenberger added that he believes the agency: "They have so much riding on this I don't think they've ever lied to any of us. The problem is what they don't tell you."

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the committee vice chairman, said he was concerned that the flight might have been "connected with any of these soldier of fortune type operations which are sort of sent out there with a wink and a shrug as a way of going around our stated foreign policy." If there is such a link, he said, "then I think we're in for some very serious trouble."

Committee spokesman David Holliday said later that, based on current information, "nobody on the committee believes that the CIA or any government agency violated the law or did something they shouldn't have done."

Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D-Md.), head of the Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs, said he thought it "unlikely" that the government was not involved. "Very little of what's happening down there right now is not somehow affected by U.S. action," he said.

Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), meanwhile, called for a House investigation into two recent air crashes in Texas and Nicaragua to determine whether they were part of an alleged covert CIA operation aimed at toppling the Sandinista government.

Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said he agreed with Assistant Secretary of State Abrams. "The Soviets are pouring all kinds of stuff in there. And unless there's some kind of an effort at equalization, the contras will be overwhelmed," he said. "Anyone who's attempting to keep them viable, I say, 'God bless 'em.'"

Abrams said he thought the plane was "what we call a benefactor flight" of the sort that had "kept the resistance alive" since Congress cut off U.S. aid to it in May 1984. "Some very brave people . . . have been willing to actually bring this material into Nicaragua, which seems to be the case with this flight," Abrams said. "God bless them If these people were involved in this effort, then they are heroes."

He said he had "some intelligence about the plane" and the people on it but that the information "is not for public consumption."

Asked about possible violations of the Neutrality Act, which bars U.S. citizens from supporting attacks on nations with which the United States is not at war, Abrams said he had advice for others seeking to aid the Nicaraguan rebels: "If you're planning to do something like this, get yourself a lawyer."